

# Factsheet: Barn Owls in Scotland

## Introduction

The Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) is a fascinating bird with quite particular habitat requirements. Our population in Scotland, estimated at merely 800 (c.4,000 in the UK), are the most northerly occurring Barn Owls worldwide. They are best described as a predator of small mammals, operating in open habitat and low light conditions. They mate for life and are sedentary in behaviour, meaning that once they have established a home range, they stay there throughout their lives. To see one quartering a field at dusk has to be one of the most magical, natural experiences you can encounter. Whilst, to hear one screeching (they don't hoot) must be one of the most memorable noises.

Wingspan: 85 - 93cm    Height: 33 - 39cm    Weight: 320 - 360g



## Threats

An adult Barn Owl would typically expect to survive 3 years (survival rate in adults is 63%). In young birds the survival rate is only 25%.

The main threats in the UK to Barn Owls are:

- Loss of habitat (e.g. rough grassland)
- Loss of roosting/nesting sites
- Land development and barn conversions
- Deaths caused by road vehicles and drowning
- Persecution and poisoning, including through the use of inappropriate rodenticides



## Feeding

Barn Owls typically feed by quartering habitat at a height of c.3 metres. On occasions they will also perch feed.

Typically their diet consists of shrews, voles and mice, although other prey items may be taken. Pellet analysis allows us to establish diet.

## Nesting & Roosting

Barn Owls are readily associated with nesting and roosting within farm buildings. In addition, they can also be found using tree hollows, private dwellings and even industrial units.

The nesting season is normally March to August, however it is worth bearing in mind that they have been found breeding in the UK in every month of the year.

## Habitat Management

Barn Owls generally prefer open habitat comprising of rough grassland which has a good litter layer (attractive to small mammals - e.g. field voles). They can also be found hunting along field edges, as well as other open areas such as drainage ditches.

**Habitat Creation** - There are many things you can do to help Barn Owls:

- Creation of litter layer (7-10cm depth)
- Protect existing nesting and roost sites
- Install appropriate artificial nest boxes
- Don't mitigate within 1km of busy roads
- Use non-toxic rodenticides (e.g. Eradirat)
- Use wooden floats in water troughs
- Carry out surveys prior to development



## Owl Species Regularly Occurring In Scotland: A Comparison

Species	Description	Habitat	Nesting Sites & Foraging Behaviour
<b>Barn Owl</b> <i>Tyto alba</i>	A medium sized owl with a pale brown back and white front. Heart shaped, white face with dark eyes. Its call is a screech (i.e. it does not hoot).	Open habitat with good litter layer, including field verges, farmyards and any areas of rough grassland where potential nesting sites exist in locality.	Usually nests in farm buildings, cavities or tree hollows. Hunts by quartering and sometimes from a perch. Feeds mostly upon small rodents (e.g. voles, mice, shrews).
<b>Tawny Owl</b> <i>Strix aluco</i>	A medium sized owl, more rounded in shape and mostly brown in appearance. Its call is the classic owl hoot.	Widespread breeding species found in woodland, parks and gardens with suitable trees.	Nests in large trees. Nocturnal hunter feeding upon small mammals, small birds, frogs, insects and worms.
<b>Short-eared Owl</b> <i>Asio flammeus</i>	A medium sized owl with blotched brown plumage, pale under wings and yellow eyes.	Moorland, heath, sand dunes, marshland and other coastal areas. Especially coastal areas during winter period.	Nests on the ground in open areas such as moorland, heath and sand dunes. Often seen hunting in daylight, feeding upon small mammals, especially voles.
<b>Long-eared Owl</b> <i>Asio otus</i>	A medium sized owl which often appears long and thin. Buff brown, with dark brown streaks and orange eyes.	Breeds thinly across the UK often found in conifer plantations, copses and woodland edge. More commonly found near the coast during winter.	Nests usually within light woodland or clumps of trees near open habitat. Mostly a nocturnal hunter feeding upon mice, voles and small birds.

## Legal Position

The Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 affords protection to all wild birds and their nests in the UK. The Barn Owl is listed as a Schedule 1 species, meaning that it is given additional protection against wilful or reckless disturbance whilst at or near its nest. This means that any survey which includes visiting a possible breeding site during the nesting season should be carried out only by persons licensed to do so by Scottish Natural Heritage. These birds are protected against disturbance from the time a scrape is made until the time that the last dependant young stop returning to the nest site.

## Find Out More!

For more information about Barn Owls or to help with their conservation please visit The Barn Owl Trust

Website: [www.barnowltrust.org.uk](http://www.barnowltrust.org.uk)

## ECHOES Ecology Ltd

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